September 29, 2003

Alison Wolfe, MNG Center at SRA
2801 Clarendon Blvd. Suite 100
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Ms. Wolfe,

On behalf of the Massachusetts Audubon Society we are writing to comment on the recently released Draft Ecological Risk Assessment (ERA) for the GE/Housatonic River Site—Rest of River. The Draft ERA shows that there are serious existing impacts as well as high levels of risks for further impacts to many species due to the widespread PCB contamination in the river and floodplain areas. Even so, we feel that the Draft ERA underestimates the risks in several respects. We request that the Final Draft Assessment increase the designated level of risk where inadequate or conflicting data is available to justify a designation of low level of risk.

Mass Audubon owns and operates the 262-acre Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary, located in Pittsfield within reach 5A, not far downstream from the confluence of the East and West branches. The sanctuary, which fronts the Housatonic River for approx. one-half mile, is home to seven state-listed species of animals and plants, including American Bittern (state endangered) and Wood Turtle (special concern). Approximately 25% of the sanctuary's acreage is within the 10-year floodplain directly affected by PCB contamination up to 120 ppm. The sanctuary, since its establishment in 1975, has been dedicated to natural resource conservation and education. As such, the negative impacts on wildlife as a result of PCB contamination weigh even more heavily upon the sanctuary than upon parcels dedicated to other uses.

With regard to conclusions contained in the draft assessment, we offer the following comments:

We feel that the risk thresholds for fish in the Draft ERA are not strict enough given that some 43% of larval Largemouth Bass raised from Woods Pond displayed swim bladder malformations. The studies conducted for the ERA also documented other physical deformities associated with exposure to PCB. Such major abnormalities are characterized as subtle in the draft assessment, but such obvious malfunctions in the manifestation of the genetic code are surely more than subtle. Fry with such serious physical deformities have a very low likelihood of surviving to become adults. Reproductive success and impact upon the adult fish population seem to have been the measures upon which the determination of minor negative impact was based. Estimates of reproductive success should not include reproduction that results in larval deformities at higher than normal levels. And as noted in the Draft ERA, the fact that the current fish advisory has produced a catch-and-release Largemouth Bass fishery may be in part responsible for the species apparent stable population. Furthermore, since populations of fish predators such as mink and otter are also being adversely affected by PCBs, adult fish predation

may be lower than "normal," contributing to apparently stable adult fish populations in spite of significant amounts of reproductive abnormalities. Taking all these factors into consideration, the determination of low-level risks for fish should be reviewed and amended in our opinion.

The assessment makes clear that aerial insectivorous bird species such as tree swallow and fish-eating birds such as Belted Kingfisher are potentially at risk because the conclusions of low risk are of low certainty due to conflicting results from other studies. This can also be said of impacts to Red and Grey Foxes. All these species have been recorded at Canoe Meadows. Where there is conflicting information and low levels of certainty the level of risk assigned for those categories of animals should be increased in order to take a more precautionary approach to risk assessment.

We agree with and strongly support the assertions in the assessment relative to conclusions of moderate to high risk for the benthic invertebrate community, the base of the entire aquatic food chain. Likewise we agree with and are concerned about the significant risk to carnivorous floodplain amphibians such as Jefferson Salamander (a state-listed species) and Spotted Salamander, both creatures entirely dependent upon vernal pools for reproduction. We note the assessment's data reflecting reduced numbers of these species in pools with high PCB concentrations.

Perhaps of highest concern are the very high-risk levels to fish-eating mammals and birds. These top of the food chain predators—specifically river otter and mink--as well as bald eagle and osprey, concentrate the contaminants in their fatty tissues at very high levels. Otter, osprey, and bald eagle have all been observed at Canoe Meadows. American Bittern, listed by the state as an endangered species, is another species recorded within the Canoe Meadow Wildlife Sanctuary's wetland communities that is placed at high risk by PCB contamination.

In addition, as the assessment states, it is very likely that that there are indirect and as yet unknown, undetected negative effects occurring inside and outside the study area. The species examined as part of the EPA's studies represent only a small subset of the important species present.

In summary, we would like to go on record as agreeing with the main conclusion of the assessment—that aquatic life and wildlife in the affected area, including Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary, are experiencing unacceptable risks as a result of exposure to PCBs. However, **we request that the final risk assessment address uncertainties in the data through a more precautionary approach that includes acknowledgement that there may in fact be a higher level of risk for some groups (such as fish).**

Even under the existing risk assessment without the modifications we have requested, it is clear that there are significant ongoing ecological impacts of widespread PCB contamination in the Rest of the River. **We urge that planning for the cleanup of the Rest of River move forward expeditiously.** While additional testing may be required to further refine the levels of risk to species mentioned above and others not yet tested, we feel that it is crucial that a work plan and timeline be created without delay to ensure that the contamination that has created these unacceptable risks to wildlife (and humans we might add) be remediated as soon as possible.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on these important issues.

Sincerely,

E. Heidi Ricci
Senior Environmental Policy Specialist

René Laubach
Sanctuary Director
Berkshire Wildlife Sanctuaries

cc: Congressman John Olver
State Senator Andrea F. Nuciforo, Jr.
State Senator Peter J. Larkin
Pittsfield Mayor Sara Hathaway
Pittsfield Ward 3 City Councilman Mark T. Brennan
Caleb Mitchell, Administrator, Pittsfield Conservation Commission
Rachel Fletcher, Housatonic River Restoration
Tad Ames, Berkshire Natural Resources Council